

Mayor's Office of Communications Assessment

August 2023

I. Methodology

Over the course of two weeks, INCISIVE conducted in-person and Zoom interviews ranging from 30 – 60 minutes with the senior leadership of the Mayor's Office of Communications. The interviewees were:

Austin Wagner	Deputy Chief of Staff	08/03/23
Michael Smith	Press Secretary	08/15/23
Lindsay Vidal	Senior Manager, Brand, Digital & Content	08/15/23
Priti Shah	Senior Communications Manager	08/18/23
Ronnie Price	Senior Communications Manager	08/18/23

To ensure an open, honest, and transparent communications and the integrity of the qualitative data collected, the assessment will not identify the specific feedback given from each individual interviewee. Rather, the analysis represents: (1.) A compilation of the primary and often consistent themes heard from the respondents; (2.) The critical skills and leadership style to be sought in a new Director of Communications; (3.) MOC functional strengths and opportunities in terms of organizational structure and alignment within the Dickens administration; (4.) Observations of the interviewers.

II. Key Findings

#1. Event Planning and Advancing the Mayor

In the Dickens administration, the MOC serves as the advance planning and handles a great deal of run of show planning, logistics, and event staffing, thus placing a great deal of time-intensive and tactical work on the team and taking away resources from strategic communications planning, according to the MOC leaders. Much of the brunt of this work is carried by the team that reports to one of the Senior Communications Managers, but notably, the groups in the MOC all said they spend more time on this work than anticipated or ideal.

- *"We work on a lot of the Mayor's 'daybook' type of content."*
- *"The challenge is keeping up with the Mayor. We do a lot of event support which does not leave a lot of room for proactive communication"*

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- *"The scheduling team used to do a lot of the advance work. However, it is now in the comms department and that just pulls resources down."*
- *Post-COVID lockdowns] when the Mayor started going back out in public, the comms department created the onsite comms team that organized images, graphics, etc.*
- *"The communications managers are the center for everything. They go to advanced locations. They have the PR, the media eye and work with Executive Protection, who needs to be invited."*

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#2. MOC Organizational Structure

As currently structured, the MOC consists of a structure wherein the department is led by the Director of Communications, who has an executive assistant and five (5) direct reports:

- Press Secretary (1)
- Senior Communications Manager (2)
- Senior Manager, Brand, Digital & Content (1)
- Director, Office of Television and Technology (1)

Press secretary – This person is responsible for handling media inquiries (tracking requests for interviews, comments, or fact verification), crafting or gathering responses from the appropriate stakeholders, organizing press conferences, writing & editing media advisories and press releases, and working with the city's legal department on media-generated open records requests. This person should also be comfortable speaking on behalf of the mayor and/or City of Atlanta to the media and public. The press secretary should be fluent in digital communications and social media as those platforms increasingly serve as a critical news and information channel for the public on par if not more than traditional media outlets and drive reputation and perceptions of the administration. This is a high-pressure role that requires agility and speed. The press secretary manages a Deputy Press Assistant and a Press Assistant, a role that is currently open.

Senior Communications Manager – As structured in the MOC, one senior communications manager leads a team of project writers and writers who execute ceremonial documents, mayoral correspondence (condolence & congratulatory letters, etc.), Phoenix Awards and other similar missives. This team of managers often also serves as the "advance team" of the Mayor's office and helps with script writing for videos and mayoral public appearances. There are currently two project managers and two writers who report to the Senior Communications Manager.

Senior Communications Manager (PIOs) – The MOC's other Senior Communications Manager manages the Public Information Officers who are in every major department of the City of Atlanta. The goal of this role is to connect the various city departments to the Mayor's overall strategy of building a city operationally equipped for the future. In addition, this manager serves as a communications conduit to the Mayor's office --- especially the Chief Operating Officer --- if there is a major operational issue in a department that could impact the city on a large scale and create blowback for the administration. This position has no direct reports in the MOC, but maintains a matrixed or dotted-line relationship to the PIOs in the city's departments.

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Senior Manager Brand, Content & Digital – This person oversees the MOC's digital platforms, namely its website and main City of Atlanta social media channels. The role requires someone who can both quickly ascertain what information needs to be shared with the public in a proactive, positive manner but who can also decide when, if, and how to respond to reputational attacks on channels such as X (formerly Twitter) and Instagram. This person has five (5) direct reports: social media manager, graphic designer, photographer (2), videographer (1) and a storyteller.

Director, Television & Technology – This person oversees Channel 26, the City of Atlanta's television station and works with People TV. There are five (5) people who report to the director.

#3. MOC Priorities and Alignment

- The previous Communications Director was viewed as primarily responsible for leading the team, serving as the key communications counselor for the mayor and his senior staff, and setting the proactive communications strategy for the administration. The importance of proactive and positive communication planning and messaging was a consistent theme in the interview. The senior leaders of the MOC often discussed not having the time or the resources to engage in as much “proactive communications” or “ongoing amplification” as desired or required by the nature of the job. Staff gave examples of wanting to spend more time on communications planning such as building a “strategic plan” and then cascading messaging around the State of the City address, for example.
- Reactive messaging and crisis communications was not a skill set that was mentioned often but when the subject arose, it was discussed as a distraction and nuisance. The MOC team especially cited the Atlanta Public Safety Training Center as a nuisance and a drag on time, energy and resources and a primary reason why more proactive communications could not be developed and disseminated.
- Finally, almost all staff discussed a lack of alignment on priorities, pressing topics, narrative direction, etc. with the senior staff in the Mayor's administration and cited a lack of coordination and dialogue among the office of the Chief of Staff, Chief Operating Officer and Senior Advisor as an obstacle in knowing how best to frame messaging and how and when to execute, etc.

III. Recommendations

1. Build crisis communications & issues management muscle in the MOC.

- o The senior leadership of the MOC appropriately recognizes the importance and necessity of proactive and positive communications about the Dickens administration and the City of Atlanta. However, there appears to be little appetite and reluctance to engage in crisis communications and issues management once an issue arises.
- o Consider hiring a communications director who has this skill set and experience within crisis communications and issues management to ensure there is a balance of individuals with this competency – and the confidence that goes along with it – on the press secretary and digital media teams.

2. Consider re-aligning the MOC to build layers of support for the various responsibilities of the team.

- o The current organizational structure of the MOC meets the baseline requirements for the department to adequately function and perform its duties to the Mayor, city and people of Atlanta. However, it may place strain on the top leaders of the office – namely the Director of Communications and the Press Secretary.
- o Consider hiring a Deputy Director of Communications who can support the Director of Communications on crisis and issues management but can also handle the internal requirements of the office, namely the functions pertaining to the two Senior Managers). The Director of Communications would then have three (3) direct reports: The Deputy Director, Press Secretary and Sr. Manager, Brand, Content & Digital.

3. Ensure adequate resources for the event planning and advance work outside of the MOC.

- o Supporting the Mayor and his team at public events is critical. The MOC should handle speechwriting, talking points, media, etc. However, communications and event planning, event logistics, and staffing are not the same skill set.
- o Consider whether the MOC ought to be responsible for advancing public mayoral events or if that is a separate function within the MOC or whether it is more appropriate to sit in the Mayor's scheduling office, with the MOC supporting the scheduling office with content, communications, and talking points..

4. Bolster the Press Secretary's team.

- o The Press Secretary should work closely with the Director of Communications and the Deputy Director of Communications (if

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the role is hired). However, this team is short-staffed with only one person and an open press manager position.

- o Consider filling the open position of press manager on the team.

5. Support the new PIO communications leader and function in the MOC.

- o The Dickens administration has astutely recognized that the communications and messaging that goes out from and are about the city's departments are a reflection on the City of Atlanta and the effectiveness of the Mayor's office. The new Senior Manager, PIOs position is a wise organizational change.
- o Consider ways to align the Sr. Manager, PIOs with the COO and Deputy COO's short and long-term objectives through regularly scheduled meetings, frequent informal touch base conversations and other ways to break down any siloes. A draft strategy and communications framework has been outlined by the Senior Communications Manager (PIOs) and should be utilized as a starting point. Consider hiring or moving a MOC staff member to support the Senior Manager, PIOs.

6. Align the writers and content producers in the MOC.

- o Two of the three Sr. Managers – Brand, Content & Digital and Communications – have content producers on their team consisting of a speechwriter, writer and storyteller. That may be a workable matrixed structure, but the teams must share and align on messaging.
- o Consider how to better align or share resources between the MOC teams so that writers of messaging are in sync with the digital team and vice versa. The Deputy Director of Communications, if the role existed, could serve as that bridge.

7. Increase collaboration between the management of the Mayor's social channels and those of the City of Atlanta.

- o The Mayor's social channels on Instagram, LinkedIn and X are platforms where he can be more human and approachable, but many positive themes about the city could be reflected there.
- o Consider if there needs to be an additional resource - either internal or through a third-party - to assist with coordinating, creating and pushing out social media content. Also, as mentioned above, review whether current staff is being optimally utilized for message coordination, consistency, and overall administration and city narrative.

IV. Director of Communications, Candidate Profile

Communications Skills

- 10-15 years in communications and public relations
- 10 years in crisis management and issues management experience
- Newsroom and/or media experience
- Excellent writer and editor; video skills a plus, but not necessary
- Comfortable speaking to the press in friendly and adversarial situations
- Influencer who can express a clearly articulated viewpoint to leaders & peers
- Digitally fluent in social media etc.

Leadership

- Ability to set a vision and lead the team
- Strong interpersonal skills to represent the Mayor and the City of Atlanta
- Work collaboratively with internal partners and external stakeholders
- Ability to quickly adapt
- Maintain a culture that attracts, retains, and motivates a diverse, qualified staff.
- Create and implement a leadership plan to ensure that all leaders within the agency are able to manage their respective departments - both from a people as well as a program perspective
- Create and execute a holistic communication strategy for the administration.